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AUTHOR Enkvist, Erik Nils
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ABSTRACT

Concepts that deal with various aspects of communicative success, or "success concepts," include grammaticality, acceptability, appropriateness, and interpretability. Because different grammarians espouse different ideas of correctness, grammaticality, defined as the relation between an utterance and a grammatical description of its language, must be supplemented with "real life" concepts. Acceptability is the relation between an expression and a set of judgments produced by a group of informants. The question is posed whether acceptability can be measured without attention to the type of person who makes the judgments or the situation in which judgments are made. Appropriateness is situational or contextualized acceptability and is a matter of style. A piece of discourse is interpretable to those who can, under the circumstances, build around that discourse a world in which the discourse make sense. Applied linguists are urged to encourage interpretability as the most basic of the success concepts. (JP)

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Success concepts

Keynote Address at the NORDTEXT Symposium, Hanasaari, May 1990

NILS ERIK ENKVIST

Abstract

In studies of discourse at all levels - syntax, semantics, pragmatics - we have use for concepts indicating greater or less success in the production of linguistic forms, meanings, and speech acts. This paper rehearses some familiar matters on grammaticality, acceptability and appropriateness, and suggests supplementing these three concepts with a fourth, interpretability.

1 Introduction

When I was honoured by an invitation to start the NORDTEXT Symposium of 1990 with a keynote address, my quest for a key word brought up "success". For communicative success is what Nordtext and its daughter projects such as NORDWRITE are really about. I therefore thought it might be in order for us to contemplate for a moment what communicative success, this strangely elusive concept pursued through millennia by rhetoricians and language teachers, actually involves.

If we search modern linguistics for relevant materials we shall find a family of concepts which I have called "success concepts" because they try to deal with various aspects of communicative success. I am thinking of (1) grammaticality, (2) acceptability, (3) appropriateness, and (4) interpretability.

2. Grammaticality

Throughout the centuries grammarians have known, or claimed to know, what expressions in a language are grammatical and what expressions are not. True, some grammarians have had doubts and admitted that there may be a twilight zone between what is grammatical and what is not, even admitting a scale of grammaticality. More commonly grammarians have accepted the onus of deciding what to approve of, and thus include among their recommendations, if they were grammarians of the recommending kind, and what to reject. On what grounds such decisions have been made is an interesting question. Often a grammarian's approval is ultimately based on social and aesthetic preferences: sentence x sounds educated and attractive, sentence y sounds ugly and would stigmatize its user as vulgar or ignorant, therefore let us say that y is wrong. Sometimes grammarians appeal to logic, as in the famous case of the

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English double or multiple negation. Not rarely do they cite analogies in support of their views. Sometimes they appeal to older forms of the language (though some have forgotten that Chaucer lived happily with multiple negation). And sometimes they appeal to norms of other, prestigious languages: we should not talk of a wooden house as dilapidated because Latin *lapis* means 'stone'. If all such attempts at rationalization fail, a grammarian can always close the debate by appealing to his own feeling of correctness and to what he regards as the norms of his own dialect. There is no arguing against *Sprachgefühl*. "In my dialect x is all right" or "in my dialect y is impossible" are arguments to end all arguments.

To trace the balance between these principles of linguistic judgement would mean tracing the entire history of grammar, no less. Let me simply make a shortcut to 1957 when Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* burst upon the world. For Chomsky's approach compelled a new look at grammaticality. Chomsky's generative rules were supposed to produce all, and only, the grammatical sentences of a language. This assumed that the grammarian could decide what sentences were grammatical and what sentences were not. And, heuristically, such decisions became even more crucial than before because they provided the only way to the testing of grammatical rules. If a rule produced only grammatical sentences it was all right, but if it produced garbage it was wrong and had to be revised. We all know what kinds of debates this view provoked: it was, once again, tempting for a grammarian to refute his critics by simply claiming that in his dialect the sentence in question was all right, or all wrong as the case may have been. Conversely, it was easy to slip into a more ambitious claim: only those sentences were grammatical that were actually produced by a specific generative grammar of the language. The generative format was a potential temptation for normativity: once one succeeded in writing an elegant and economical set of generative rules, it saved a lot of fuss to brush aside breaches against such rules as ungrammatical, even where such breaches were produced by competent speakers. One of the devices for dismissing what did not fit was to brand it as mere performance, as opposed to the competence which it was the linguist's business to look into.

In this way, the term "grammaticality" could be related to grammar rather than anchored in real life. It could be divorced from the communication of people of flesh and blood, from what people really do when they speak and write. To escape the fuzz of the term "grammaticality" (which has sometimes been used to suggest 'what grammarians approve' and sometimes 'what native speakers actually do') we might try to define it in terms of the relation between a sentence, or perhaps utterance, and a specific, existing grammatical description of the language. If, and only if, the

grammar approves of an expression, is that expression grammatical in relation to that grammar.

But, notoriously, different grammarians have been known to have different ideas of correctness, of what to approve and what to frown upon. Wars are too important to be left to generals, said Clemenceau; and we might add that languages are too important to be left to grammarians. We must supplement the concept of "grammaticality", in the sense of a relation between an utterance and a grammatical description of its language, with other concepts which bring in more real life into our linguistics and are beyond the reach of linguists' manipulations. Languages do after all exist in a noisy marketplace among much hustle and bustle, rather than within the cleanly confines of a tight fence of rules. Therefore grammaticality needs supplementing.

3. Acceptability

Since the pioneering work of Sir Randolph Quirk and his collaborators at University College London, we have had at our disposal another, precisely definable success concept, namely "acceptability". By acceptability we mean the relation between an expression and a set of judgements produced by a group of informants, a jury if you like. I presume the acceptability studies of the Quirk team are too well known to need further presentation here. The original approach, as you recall, was simply to consult a group of students who could not run away, for instance in connection with a lecture, and make them judge the acceptability of sentences on a three-point form rather like a football-pool slip: undoubtedly OK, doubtful, and undoubtedly wrong. This simple method was gradually refined in various ways. But the approach gives us a useful concept: where grammaticality measures the fit between a sentence and a grammar, acceptability measures the degree to which a group of informants are prepared to accept, or reject, a sentence or an utterance.

As Sir Randolph and his colleagues have carefully noted, such studies raise a number of problems and queries. We know different people speak differently. Northerners differ from Southerners, some labourers from some professors. How can we, in our acceptability studies, be sure that our jurors are a sufficiently homogeneous group? Also, we know that the same person will speak and write differently in different situations. Can we therefore measure acceptability in a contextual vacuum, without paying attention to what kind of person makes the judgements and in what kind of situation? In fact an acceptability judgment presumably presupposes tacit contextualization. What we do when we are asked whether we accept or reject an expression is presumably that we try to imagine situations in which that expression

might be used. If we can think of such a situation we accept the expression; if not, we reject it.

4. Appropriateness

To make clear the dependence of acceptability on situation we therefore need yet another, third, concept, situational or contextualized acceptability which we might call appropriateness. We know that certain expressions are accepted as traditional when uttered by a sergeant to an army recruit in his squad or platoon, but that they would cause chagrin if the sergeant tried them on his mother, and scandal if uttered by the sergeant to the Queen who gives him a medal for bravery. The relation between situational context, in the widest sense, and an expression is also the basis of what we call style: our impressions of styles, so I believe, are based on our matching of an emerging expression with our past experiences of language in situations we regard as relevant and comparable. Such expectations can be fulfilled or thwarted in various degrees, and accordingly we experience the style as traditional or as new. And it depends on our culture and personality whether we are classicists by temper and prefer satisfied expectations, or romantics and set a premium on what is new, fresh, surprising and even shocking.

Grammaticality, then, is a matter of arbitration. Acceptability is a matter of data-gathering and statistics on informant behaviour. And appropriateness is a matter of past experience as projected onto the present; it is a matter of temperament, taste and decorum. One of the reasons why literary criticism is an open-ended business is that the criteria of stylistic judgements change with critic and with age. Stylistic fashions have their hemlines as it were: during one period all must be up, during another period all must be down, and sometimes 'maxi' coexists with 'mini' in a spirit of anarchic pluralism.

It goes without saying that appropriateness judgements, being the most subtly subjective of the three types of success measurements I have mentioned so far, are also the most difficult to study and to justify. Literary criticism is full of examples where critics disagree: the Victorians thought Donne was uncouth, T.S. Eliot thought he was superb. It is indeed difficult to think of exact research methods for measuring stylistic acceptability. There are instances, for instance in studies of taboo words or so-called "dirty" words such as those carried out by Magnus Ljung, where you can ask, "Would you use this word to your mother? to your girl friend? to your buddies in the army?" And the study of euphemisms also springs to mind. You probably all recall the often-cited statement allegedly from the *News of the World*: "A girl's dismembered body was found in a trunk in Paddington Station. She had not been

interfered with." But these are crude and simple instances. When we go on from taboo, euphemism and single words to more complex syntactic and discoursal devices, judgements of appropriateness get increasingly complex too.

5. Interpretability

These three success concepts - grammaticality, acceptability, appropriateness - still do not cover the entire field of success and failure. They should, I think, be supplemented with at least one further concept, perhaps the most fundamental of them all. I am speaking of comprehensibility or interpretability. Here the operative question is: under what circumstances is an utterance interpretable? As interpretability is by no means irrelevant to students of discourse, I shall try to say a few words about the challenges one will meet when thinking about it.

In trying to define interpretability we are up against various problems. The first is caused by the obvious fact that the interpretability of an utterance is not determined by its grammatical well-formedness alone. In impromptu speech we all produce utterances which work nicely in their situational context but which may horrify and disgust not only grammarians but even ourselves when we see them in an accurate written transcription. Indeed there are many of us who claim that the features of *parole* or 'performance' which syntacticians are in the habit of washing out of their data in fact have important functions in impromptu speech. We must have mechanisms of hesitation, we must have devices that dilute the text to make processing easier for ourselves and our hearers. And we can often profit from formal correspondences, isomorphisms or iconicities, which make texts pictures of the world. One kind of iconic ordering reflects information flow, for instance from old to new information or perhaps vice versa. Another type of iconicity makes us report events in the order in which they took place, unless we choose to mark departures from such 'natural order': *John and Susie had a baby and got married* does not mean the same as *John and Susie got married and had a baby*, but we can mark a mismatch between event order and report order as in *John and Susie had a baby after they had married*. And we must have devices of repentance, repair and correction which enable us to improve what went wrong - spoken equivalents of an eraser as it were. Also there are types of discourse in which a speaker or writer wilfully departs from his ordinary well-formedness patterns, as in modern poetry or in some advertising. And there are situations where an inarticulate grunt is perfectly interpretable: remember me next time your dentist drills into live nerve tissue in a root canal!

Another obvious problem is that every message is, in real life, accompanied by a metamessage (to use a felicitous term which I owe to Deborah Tannen). As a thought

experiment, imagine for a moment that I should, here and now, switch into Finnish. Most of you in the audience would be lost as to the referential meaning of my Finnish discourse. But you would all the same regard my strange behaviour as significant and meaningful. You might question my sanity, you might (more charitably) suspect a linguistic demonstration illustrating a point of my talk, and you would probably respond to intonation patterns and paralinguistic features drawing conclusions as to my happiness, anger and other moods (which might easily be wrong because they would be based on extrapolations of patterns from languages other than Finnish).

Such a thought experiment shows that, in authentic communication, the message, the referential core, is always accompanied by a number of circumstances that make us deduce something about the speaker's or writer's behaviour, mental state, attitudes and the like. The linguistic message is surrounded by a set of semiotic codes, in the sense of sets of elements that contrast with other elements. A person's clothes at a certain social function signal something to those observing him, perhaps different things to different people of different generations. "Professors at the Helsinki University of Technology," one of them once told me, "wear suits to faculty meetings except if they are professors of architecture." And one of my younger colleagues at Åbo Akademi, so I am told, has two sets of clothes: tails for academic ceremonies, and jeans for everything else. Clothes, proxemic movement, gesture, paralinguistic features such as loudness and shifts in tempo and non-syntactic features of intonation all bring with them their own metamessages. And in writing we draw conclusions from handwriting, the typography, the quality of the paper and envelope, and the like.

My point is of course that the interpretability of a message does not only consist of effects of the message proper but also of everything conveyed by the metamessage. In learning a foreign language we may have more difficulties with metamessages than with messages proper, particularly if the source and target cultures are very different. We may unwittingly get ourselves into great trouble, for instance by touching the head of a Fijian or by walking into a mosque with our shoes on beside a lady friend in shorts.

What, then, is interpretability? If it is not a function of grammaticality, acceptability and appropriateness, what is it? The best I can do is to shift the burden of the definition from linguistic form and pragmatics into cognition and suggest that a piece of discourse is interpretable to those who can, under the prevailing circumstances, build around that piece of discourse a world in which the discourse makes sense.

Note that I said that a piece of discourse is interpretable only to those who succeed in building a world around it. Interpretability is receptor-sensitive: to some people a piece of discourse can be interpretable and to others not. Interpretability depends on the equipment the interpreter brings to his job. Note also that I said that the

interpretability of discourse depends on the prevailing circumstances. We all know that many utterances are interpretable in a certain definite context and become opaque when decontextualized. Finally I hid another problem by saying that we interpret discourse by surrounding it with a world in which it makes sense. There are at least two ways of defining what makes sense. Those devoted to truth-functional semantics might say that a text makes sense if we can surround it with a world in which it might be true ("might be" rather than "is" to allow for fiction). And those devoted to pragmatics might say that a text makes sense if the world of discourse surrounding it conforms to acceptable maxims of human behaviour, such as the Gricean principles, the Sperber-Wilson principles of relevance and the like. Truth-functional semantics thus emphasizes the referential function of discourse, pragmatic comprehension the social and communicative function including the metamessage. There is as far as I can see nothing preventing us from combining truth-functional criteria of interpretability with pragmatic criteria; so far it seems as if few semanticists would have had an outlook sufficiently catholic to put both under one hat, or inside the same skull.

Now how is this relevant to our agenda at NORDTEXT? Both at the theoretical and at the applied levels, I would like to suggest. We are concerned with text comprehension, which is the ultimate problem of all text and discourse linguistics. And on the applied side our job is to find out what makes some texts more successful than others. Would Herbert Spencer and Theodor Fechner perhaps have been right in equating stylistic excellence and textual beauty with what we would today call ease of processing? If the processing and interpretation of a text involves world-building, then how should a text be organized to facilitate such world-building?

To answer such a question we should first try to specify what information consists of. Information consists of an elimination of alternatives. We eliminate alternatives by making explicit, by specifying, the one that holds. And we can specify matters in two ways, either through direct specification or through inference. What in fact is, in each situation, the optimal balance between explicit specification and implicit inference? Another problem following directly from the view of a text as a sequence of eliminations of alternatives has to do with the order in which alternatives are eliminated and new details added to the world of the text. Here we come to what I have called text strategies, that is, to the set of principles a speaker or writer opts for in order to lead his receptor to the proper text world or scenario by eliminating alternatives in a specific order. This order is translated into syntax via information dynamics, that is, via the interplay of old and new information, theme and rheme, topic and focus.

All students of text and discourse must by definition be concerned with text strategies and with the solution of text-strategic problems. And this is done by means of the tactical devices offered by syntax and lexis (and please note the analogy with strategy and tactics in the military sense). A large proportion of the means offered by the lexis and syntax of a language exist precisely to make possible different text strategies, most obviously through the choice between lexical converses (*Susie is Betty's mother / Betty is Susie's daughter*), between syntactic structures (*John ate the apples / The apples were eaten by John*), and least marked and fronted structures (*I have read this book / This book I have read*). It is a highly instructive exercise to browse in a dictionary and a grammar, asking oneself which of the items and structures might serve text strategies by regulating the order in which alternatives are eliminated.

Is, then, an utterance interpretable or uninterpretable in a binary fashion, or is interpretability a scale? I already hinted at the role of metamessages: even those who cannot interpret the message proper, as some of you would have failed to grasp my Finnish, will shift the interpretive burden onto the metamessage and draw conclusions about the speaker's state and purposes. As to the referential contents, as to the message proper, I presume the answer involves an interpretability threshold. Some interpreters remain below the threshold and simply cannot make referential sense of the message: this would be my situation when faced with, say, Turkish. Others may pass the threshold and extract some referential sense out of the text: this would be my situation with a text on, say, nuclear physics in English. I would place the text in a world of discourse on nuclear physics, but I would remain incapable of surrounding it with its proper network of references. A physicist would not only pass the threshold but also climb high, or even to the top if the text was in his area of specialization, of the scale of interpretability. So, the place of the threshold and the degree of interpretability above the threshold depend on an interplay between the receptor, his linguistic prowess, and his familiarity with the subject matter and its world.

A brief *caveat*. One of the problems I have not taken up in this talk has to do with the intricate interplay between bottom-up and top-down processing involving different levels of linguistic structure such as phonology, syntax, and lexis, and the pragmatic aspects of situation. Let me merely repeat that it is possible to succeed in communication, in pragmatics and semantics, despite ill-formed syntactic and phonological structures. Under certain circumstances, higher-level, top-down processes can thus cover up faults in lower-level structuring.

6. Conclusion

As applied linguists interested in discourse, we should now ask ourselves what we can do to improve the world and help our fellow men towards increased successes in discourse comprehension and in appropriate linguistic behaviour. These are, of course, the ultimate problems of all language learning. If the problems gain in clarity after a discussion of success concepts, these concepts have done their job and served us well. Instead of trying to deal with them, let me just make one suggestion. Making all learners achieve native or near-native skills in a foreign language is an impracticable ideal. What we should do is to try to find the optimal goals we can reach within the time and effort at our disposal. Interpretability must rank as the most basic goal of all: what we say should be interpretable, it should reach above the interpretability threshold in the relevant situational context. And appropriateness is the second important goal: what we say should not overstep certain limits of appropriateness, allowing for the tolerance limits set by the situation. Obviously a person with a thick foreign accent will be forgiven trespasses that a person who passes for a native would be punished for. As to acceptability, in spoken discourse, fluency will contribute to discoursal acceptability: a fluent speaker good at using hesitation signals and correction mechanisms and other communication-strategic devices stands a decent chance of covering up her grammatical shortcomings. Actual grammaticality, in the technical sense in which I have used it for the purposes of this talk, may well rank lowest of the success criteria in actual impromptu-speech communication. In writing, the relative importance of the same success criteria may be different. When contemplated at leisure and in cold blood, ungrammaticalities may well diminish the effect, and thus interfere with communication, of a written, and perhaps especially a printed, text. A fluent speaker may receive absolution for sins never forgiven to those who venture into print.

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Nils Erik Enkvist is currently the Chancellor of Åbo Akademi University and one of the twelve Finnish Academicians in the Academy of Finland. He has lectured and published widely on style, text and discourse. In 1984 he convened and organized the Symposium on Coherence and Composition at which NORDTEXT was founded.